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Memorial of Thackeray's School Days:-
Cornhill Magazine, 1865

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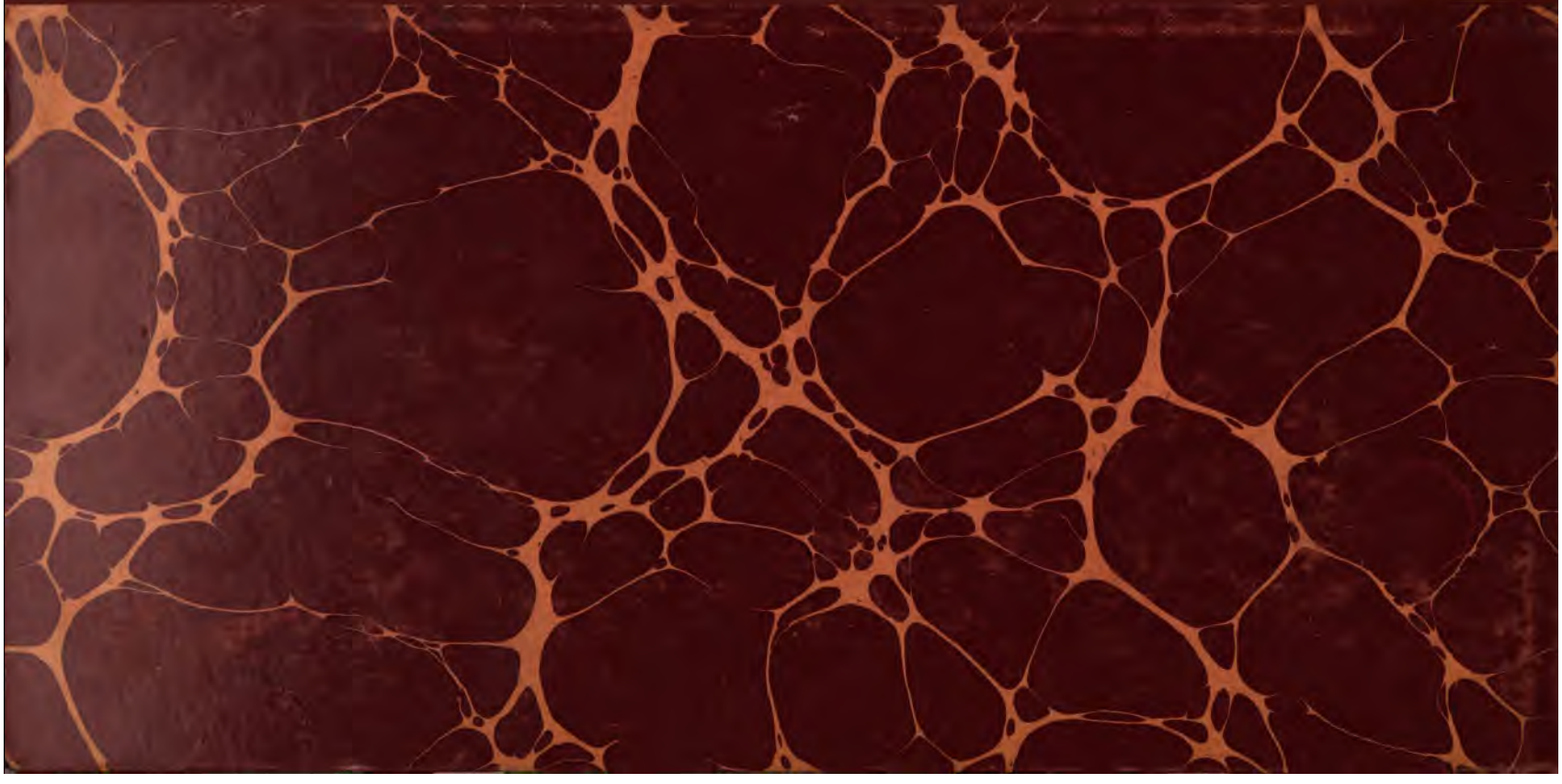

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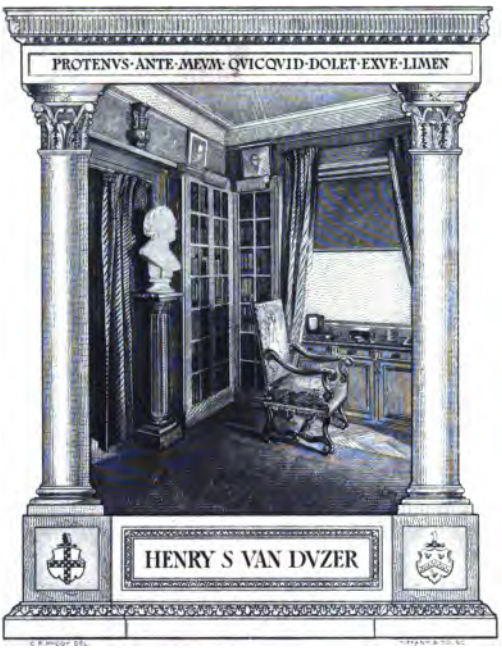


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THE

# CORNHILL MAGAZINE.

JANUARY, 1865.

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# A Memorial of Thackeray's School-Days.

It may be interesting to those who have known Thackeray only at a distance and from his works, and to not a few of those, also, who had personal intimacy with him in his later life, to hear a little about his earlier. There are, of course, many of his schoolfellows still living who had such general knowledge of him as boys ordinarily have of each other in a large public school; but only two or three survive who were closely intimate with him out of school-hours, and who knew what his tastes and amusements were, and what his character and disposition when off drill. I do not propose to give the present sketch because I can do it well, but because I am almost the only one who can do it at all. The notices that appeared of him at a time when our sorrow for his loss was yet recent touched very slightly upon his school-days, and, in the many and varied judgments of his personal character, the critics have gained very little light from any knowledge of him when that character was in the course of forming. After all, it is only an outer key that I, or any bystander, can put into the reader's hand. The lock of the inner character of even a boy of genius is generally so complex that it cannot be opened from without.

In speaking of the youth of a great man there is, perhaps, some temptation to throw back a little of the light and colour of the later days upon the earlier; in a faithful portrait this must steadily be resisted. It is more allowable to give those traits of the earlier days which best interpret the later, and it is perfectly fair to suggest the interpretation.

It was when he was between the ages of thirteen and fifteen and a half or sixteen that I knew Thackeray best. He was then a rosy-faced boy with dark curling hair, and a quick, intelligent eye, ever twinkling with humour, and *good* humour. He was stout and broad-set, and gave no promise of the stature which he afterwards reached. It was during a short but severe illness, just before he left school, that he grew rapidly, leaving his sick-bed certainly a good many inches taller than he was when he entered it, and heading at once nearly all his contemporaries. No man ever owed more of his mental growth to time and exercise, and less of his bodily stature.

For the usual schoolboy sports and games Thackeray had no taste or passion whatever, any more than in after-life for those field-sports which seem to have been the delight of his schoolfellow and fellow humorist, Leech. Such amusements would have come probably next to Euclid and algebra in his list of dislikes. But he was by no means what a good many men of genius are said to have been in their youth—disposed to isolation or solitary musing. For a non-playing boy he was wonderfully social, full

of vivacity and enjoyment of life. His happy *insouciance* was constant. Never was any lad at once so jovial, so healthy, and so sedentary. Good spirits and merriment seemed to enable him to dispense with the glow of cricket or foot-ball; and if in his still earlier days he ever "fagged out," it must have been most bitterly against his will. We were now and then, indeed, out together in small fishing parties, but it was for the talking, and the change, and the green fields, and the tea abroad instead of at home—cakes, &c. accompanying (for he was always rather gustative, never greedy)—that Thackeray liked these expeditions.

I question whether he knew the difference between a roach and a gudgeon—except when fried—whether he ever caught either the one or the other I am much disposed to doubt; or whether he cared about doing so. Thus the reader may have seen many a citizen angler on the banks of the Lea, or punted on the Thames, with vast provision of tackle and ground-bait, but whose main felicity, to judge from the tankard and sandwiches by his side, does not depend on anything so capricious as a fish's appetite, but on something far more certain and substantial, videlicet his own.

I have just now lying on the table beside me, in Thackeray's handwriting of some forty years ago,—his writing was always beautiful,—a little programme of *Bombastes Furioso*, enacted by himself and some three or four of his schoolfellows, in which he took the part of Fusbos, and to the best of my recollection, did it very well; but the thing dropped through, and there were no repetitions; the rest had very little dramatic zeal. This was almost the only common amusement in which I ever knew him join, *con amore*. He had a passion for theatricals, of course kept under restraint at school, but now and then gratified when he visited friends in London, on the half-holidays.

There was also a little speaking club in which he would sometimes take part merely out of good nature, for he hated speaking then, and I do not believe he liked it much better afterwards.

He was eminently good-tempered to all, especially the younger boys, and nothing of a tyrant or bully. Instead of a blow or a threat, I can just hear him saying to one of them, "Hooky" (a sobriquet of a son of the late Bishop Carr, of Bombay), "go up and fetch me a volume of *Ivanhoe* out of my drawer, that's a good fellow; in the same drawer you will, perhaps, find a penny, which you may take for yourself." The penny was, indeed, rather problematical, but still realized sufficiently often to produce excitement in the mind of the youth thus addressed, and to make the service a willing one. When disappointed, it was more than probable that the victim would call Thackeray a "great snob" for misleading him, a title for which the only vengeance would be a humorous and benignant smile. In the two or three years that I am recording, I scarcely ever saw Thackeray seriously angry, or even his brow wrinkled with a frown. He has been called a cynic; it is doubtful whether a real cynic could ever be manufactured out of a boy who had such powers as he had of sarcasm,

and who used them so little unkindly. Nor is it to be believed, by those who knew him well, that, though in after-life he had his eruptions of wrath, and moments of severity, after he had undergone the tremendously searching hot and cold ordeal of great trials and great triumphs, his nature was radically changed.

Thackeray had nearly all the materials that usually go to the making of a first-rate classical scholar. He had wonderful memory, an absolute faculty of imitation, which might have been employed in following the great classic models of verse and prose; he had the power of acquiring language; and, it is needless to say, an intense admiration of the beautiful. He got to love his Horace, and was, no doubt, *actually* a better scholar than many of our first-rate writers of English; but he was not, and never pretended to be, a high classical scholar. I speak of the fact; none but a pedant would think of detracting from him on that ground: we have five hundred, five thousand high classical scholars, without getting a Thackeray out of them. "Son esprit était à libre allure," as Lamartine says of one of his school friends. He had no school industry. One would be sorry to let any schoolboy read the long list of great literary men of whom the same might be said. Probably, too, as a younger boy he had been ill-grounded, and so lost confidence when he came to cope with those who had been better initiated, and gave up the race in which he thought he might fail, for he had plenty of pride and ambition. Not one of us would have given him credit for that "stalk of carl hemp" with which he met subsequent misfortunes and difficulties, and that firm and noble perseverance with which he worked his way gradually upwards, when the cheers of encouragement were comparatively faint and few. No one could in those early days have believed that there was much work in him, or that he would ever get to the top of any tree by hard climbing.

Thackeray, then, experienced the usual amount of nausea, and perhaps of difficulty, in making verses and translations, and was, at fourteen, more thankful, perhaps, than most boys are for a helping hand. I see now, on the back of one of his drawings, on the same sheet with a portion of an old exercise, this acknowledgment in intentional doggerel—

> These verses were written by William Ewbank,
> And him for his kindness I very much thank.

His exercise was, indeed, constantly left to the very last moment, whilst he was busy with a burlesque sketch of its subject, or deeply engaged in a volume of Shakspeare, Scott, or Southey, from whom he took his real lessons, not from Chapman or Churton.

Burke, when speaking of the American colonies, praises "the wise and salutary neglect by which a generous nature is allowed to take its own way to perfection." Doubtless the neglect of the rich ore of Thackeray's talents was not deliberate on the part of his masters, but it served the purpose as well as if it had been. In the wholesale ways and large classes

of a multitudinous public school, as Charterhouse then was, many of the gifted pass without recognition of their gifts, if they do not appear to be of the kind specially in demand. In some cases this is a pity; but it may be doubted whether even the anxious and perpetual superintendence of a careful and clever private tutor, appreciating and trying to make the most of his material, would have been so useful to Thackeray as were his freedom and self-chosen course. Had his scholarship been perfected like that of a Canning or a Frere, early scholastic distinction might have tempted him to the regular practice of a profession other than that of a man of letters, with its struggles, experiments, and varied contact with men. Perhaps he never would have submitted to professional trammels; had he done so, the sparkles of such a wit could not have been hid, but they would probably have passed off in *jeux d'esprit*, or those lighter efforts for which alone there is generally room where original genius submits to the burdens of successful professional toil. At any rate, we should have been far less likely to have had our great novelist.

Though keenly ambitious, and very sensitive of failure, Thackeray was wonderfully free from anything like vanity or conceit. He had small confidence in his own powers, and was naturally inclined to rate himself below his mark. The better scholarship of many of his contemporaries may have had something to do with this. However, this want of confidence showed itself in many ways afterwards, and even at a time when his genius and his fame were at their full growth. For example, he was, even to the last, sensitive of blame to a degree scarcely ever found in men satisfied of their own powers. Like other great but inwardly modest men, his first impulse was to overrate rather than underrate the ability of others, and he readily accorded the "clever fellow," uttered in perfect sincerity, though, when he came to a thorough examination of their performances, he was keen critic enough. Not many years ago, he complained to me, with most earnest sincerity, of the poorness of his memory, when every book that he wrote was giving fresh proof of its retentiveness, and the readiness with which it recalled everything that he had read or seen—a faculty that gave him a power of varied allusion *without cram*, in which he seems to have only one rival among the writers of fiction of the present day. To his friends he talked freely of the difficulties he experienced in writing. His own final great and deserved success, he never anticipated. Some years before the publication of *Vanity Fair*, he told me, whilst passing a day with me in the country, that he had a novel in his desk which, if published, would sell, he thought, to about seven hundred copies. Could this have been *Vanity Fair?* I rather think it must have been.

I dwell the more upon this point, because it appears to me to be a key to a certain characteristic of his writing, the constant introduction of the "*non tanti est*" both as regards things in general, and his own lucubrations upon them. His first sobriquet of "Michael Angelo Titmarsh" had a great deal of meaning for those who knew him well. His beau-idéal was

serious and sublime; he was too familiar with, too much a master of, the humorous, to think as much about that mastery as his admirers did. I have heard him speak in terms of homage to the genius of Keats which he would not have vouchsafed to the whole tribe of humorists. But when he himself launched out of the playful into the serious, how often do we find him half "mocking himself and scorning his spirit," not for "smiling," but for the contrary. He seems to shrink from the idea of incurring the satire conveyed in these lines of Churchill:

> When humour was thy province, for some crime
> Pride struck thee with the frenzy of sublime.

And he descends quickly again to the humorous, where he fancied himself, though perhaps he was not, more at home.

Let me be pardoned for this excursion, if I have struck upon a key which has been missed in the general criticisms on Thackeray, by those who knew little or nothing of his early character.

Men are reluctant enough—boys perhaps even more than men—to allow more than one forte to the same individual; all would have accorded two to Thackeray. First and foremost, his power of drawing, especially caricature; it was probably the high esteem in which this was held by his friends and schoolfellows, that led him afterwards to think of the pencil as a resource before the pen. Leech, at Charterhouse, was too much his junior to cope with him, and so he was *facile princeps* in drawing of an

amusing kind: indeed very much of his time was taken up with it. I have now in my possession a great number of his sketches and drawings, long carefully guarded in affectionate remembrance of those early days, when I little anticipated the fame of the draughtsman. It is from these that the illustrations which give its principal value to this little memorial are taken. It seems to me sometimes, as I look them over, that his power of drawing fell rather back as he advanced in authorship; at least, in his early drawings the types were much more varied, indeed they seemed scarcely to have any limit. On the preceding page are two examples; another will be found on the last page: they are copied with the closest accuracy.

From Homer, from Horace, from Scott's poems, from Cooper's novels, from any author he happened to have in hand, he found subject for fantastic and humorous illustrations; whilst we looked on, wondering at the quickness of his brain and fingers.

Old King Cole

Thackeray was decidedly musical as a boy, and had a capital ear; but just as he disliked formal speaking, so it was his nature to shrink from

the small amount of personal display involved in singing a song—*i. e.* after the age of self-consciousness. In short, he was highly nervous in all such matters, and could never, I think, in his earlier years, be made anything of as a small "show-child of genius." However, if a schoolfellow hummed or whistled the air of one of his favourite songs, it would often set him embodying its subject in the manner shown on this and the preceding page.

"Strike Strike the light Guitar"

Is there not something of kindred between this power and passion for burlesque, and that "*non tanti est*" feeling referred to above, and also that particular turn of thought which has been called cynicism in his writings, as I venture to think, untruly? There was no bitterness in him, and genial good-nature prevented his satire from any sharp biting of individuals. No one was ever freer from what old Johnson tersely calls "a diligent cultivation of the power of dislike." In after-life he was one of the right kind of satirists; not of the family of Diogenes, who went about with a lanthorn in search of an honest man, whom he would have been vastly disappointed to have found, but rather akin to Talus of the *Faerie Queen*, who, for the sake of justice and humanity, lays about him with his flail at all kinds of rascality. His onslaughts were, to use the words of a great artist and satirist before him,—

Figlie d'umanità più che di sdegno.*

Our greatest satirists, whether in prose or verse, with one or two exceptions, have not been bad or unkind men, but the contrary.

There are very few, I believe, who have acted more faithfully up to what they thought and wrote than Thackeray did. Instances of the contrary in great writers are endless. I will take one: Goldsmith's Essays are an epitome of keen observation, sound common sense, and

* Perhaps Salvator Rosa might more properly have called his satires "Children of Humanity *and* of Indignation." When Thackeray chose to smile at human faults and follies, it was not from any want of earnest feeling, for his nature was affectionate, and his sense of the "just and unjust" most keen. Strangers have interpreted his character from his writings; friends, his writings from his character: the latter have done him the most justice. He had attributes that never belonged to any "cynic." First and foremost, he delighted in the happiness of others, was quite an apostle of early marriage, and sympathized in its joys and trials. "Il jouissait dans le cœur des autres." He gave his warm approbation to those only of our great writers who were really worthy as men, and had an evident contempt for authors of the true cynical character, as, in their several ways, Swift and Sterne.

worldly wisdom; his life was full of imprudences and weakness. Though sadly swindled in early life, from too much generous confidence, Thackeray had great practical common sense; nor was the following up of the word by the deed easy in his case, for his conceptions of the just and the generous were of heroic compass. One consequence, however, of this was, that every "break-down" of human nature striving after good, contributed rather to feed that *vive la bagatelle* feeling, to which other peculiarities of his mind also tended, as I have endeavoured to show elsewhere.

Thackeray had an intense dislike for anything like meanness, shabbiness, pretentiousness, or tyranny, and a very quick eye for discovering them; he had, too, just a smack of social pride, which led him afterwards, in his *Snob Papers*, to deal rather hard measure not merely to snobs in heart and feeling, but to sheer imbecility, foolish dressing, and helpless ignorance of conventional manners and good breeding. This, however, be it observed, never prevented him in his days of prosperity from holding out the hand of aid and fellowship to men his inferiors in what is usually called social position. Let me add that it was his high gentlemanlike feeling which, in spite of great natural love of ease, saved him from that lapse into a state of dependence into which a vast number of men of genius have been content to fall, which made him trust to himself, whilst he aided others, and wrestle with the dark angel of adversity till she brightened and blessed him.

A kindred accomplishment to that of caricaturing was his art of parody, afterwards brought to a climax in his imitations of eminent novelists. This, however, he practised rarely, comparatively speaking. I subjoin what I believe to have been about his earliest essay in this line; it has never, I think, been in print. He must have been about fourteen when it was written. The parody I copy from memory; for the original I have been obliged to refer to poor L. E. L.'s poems, who in those days wrote in the *Literary Gazette*, where I fancy Thackeray caught sight of the lines, and thought them over-sentimental.

VIOLETS.

Violets! deep blue violets!
April's loveliest coronets:
There are no flowers grow in the vale,
Kissed by the sun, woo'd by the gale,
None with the dew of the twilight wet,
So sweet as the deep blue violet.

I do remember how sweet a breath
Came with the azure light of a wreath,
That hung round the wild harp's golden chords
That rung to my dark-eyed lover's words;
I have seen that dear harp rolled
With gems of the East and bands of gold,
But it never was sweeter than when set
With leaves of the dark blue violet.

And when the grave shall open for me—
I care not how soon that time may be—
Never a rose shall blow on my tomb,
It breathes too much of hope and bloom;
But let me have there the meek regret
Of the bending and deep blue violet.

CABBAGES.

Cabbages! bright green cabbages!
April's loveliest gifts, I guess,
There is not a plant in the garden laid,
Raised by the dung, dug by the spade,
None by the gardener watered, I ween,
So sweet as the cabbage, the cabbage green.

I do remember how sweet a smell
Came with the cabbage I loved so well,
Served up with the beef that beautiful looked,
The beef that the dark-eyed Ellen cooked.
I have seen beef served with radish of horse,
I have seen beef served with lettuce of Cos,
But it is far nicer, far nicer, I guess,
As bubble and squeak, beef and cabbages.

And when the dinner-bell sounds for me—
I care not how soon that time may be—
Carrots shall never be served on my cloth;
They are far too sweet for a boy of my broth;
But let me have there a mighty mess
Of smoking hot beef and cabbages.

If the reader can bring to his own mind an instance of biography in which the school-boy *bon-mots* of a great man have been carefully recorded, he may blame me for not making here a record of Thackeray's. They have passed away with the hours which they enlivened, and the laughter, or more often the smiles, that they raised. He was, as may easily be believed, our great humorist, and touched most of our weak points good-naturedly and without offence. Nothing in character escaped him.*

He was not, I think, in those days an inventor of stories; certainly I never knew him try his hand at a plot; this power was gained afterwards, and gradually, as must be very evident to those who have followed his works in their series. He was an omnivorous reader, that is, of good English books; a trashy volume he would have thrown down in five minutes. His taste selected good books, and so his style was in a continual course of formation on good models. Memoirs, moralists like Addison and Goldsmith, and fiction and poetry from the best hands, were his favourites; but in those days he never worked in earnest at anything serious in the way of composition, or put his power to the stretch in any way.

We took in the Magazines—*Blackwood*, the *New Monthly*, the *London*, and the *Literary Gazette*—then in nearly their first glory, and full of excellent articles. I do not know who first suggested this, or whether it was a common thing for the senior boys at the public schools to club together for any such purpose; probably not, from the incuriosity about such reading that generally prevailed at one at least of the universities. I am sure there was very little indeed of any such leaven in the mingled mass of undergraduates of my own college. It was a positive intellectual descent from the school set to which Thackeray belonged to the ordinary college level, and a very considerable one. With the exception of a small group here and there, a knowledge of and interest in the better kinds of contemporary literature was very rare indeed at the colleges.

It is uncertain what college tutors or schoolmasters may think of Magazine reading for their pupils; to the set of whom I am now speaking my belief is that it was most advantageous, and that it proved to be a very strong stimulus of literary curiosity and ambition. The constantly fresh monthly or weekly supply of short articles seemed to bring home the fact of literary production, and made it appear, in some degree, within reach. This was the real commencement of Thackeray's connection with the Magazines, which he used to read with the greatest eagerness, little inter-

* As minor, but not insignificant notes of character, it may be added that Thackeray always dressed plainly but well, and had no turn to foppery. To those who had the charge of him he was kindly, gentlemanlike, and reasonable, having, in spite of all his high spirits, no kind of youthful ὕβρις, either to juniors or seniors. Partly by kind temper, and also by an acute sense of the ridiculous in conduct, he was saved from a good many of the absurdities which, in big boys, amuse or annoy, as the case may be.

fered with by any school responsibilities. No doubt he often then thought what a pleasant thing it would be to be one of the guild, and first felt that "indrawing into the sea" of letters, which he afterwards obeyed. This kind of reading, too, led to much youthful criticism of the topics and merits of the "periodical" men of the day; the *Quarterly* and *Edinburgh* only being rather too high and dry for us.

"Uva uvam spectans maturescit;"—grape ripens grape, and the finest are by no means the first ripe. If this life were the "be all and end all," we might sometimes fancy that many good and clever men have been brought into the world chiefly for the maturation of others. Thackeray was by no meaus unindebted to the boys amongst whom he happened to be thrown, for those of his own age and a little older were of high promise, and could fully understand him and sympathize with him. What havoc has time made in that party, always a small one!

Ewbank, who was one of the oldest, and, in the school sense, one of the best Charterhouse men, and a medallist, when Charterhouse was one of our largest public schools, has long slept in a grave amongst the rocks of Sinai. He was a true scholar, and more than that, a man of worth, genius, and taste, by no means limited to Æschylus and Tacitus, but equally well up in Shakspeare and Milton; his classical and English scholarship twined gracefully together: he was one of Thackeray's ripeners.

Carne was nearer Thackeray's age, and a good English verse writer, rather in Praed's manner. He could recite Walter Scott, Southey, and Pope's *Homer* without limit; could give and take well in a contest of wit, and was a capital speaker. He was said to have been afterwards the best of the Cambridge Union in his day—a sadly short one: he died of decline at Madeira, I believe before he had taken his degree.

Stoddart, who was, perhaps, Thackeray's greatest favourite of all, afterwards fellow and tutor of St. John's College, Oxford, lies in the English cemetery at Genoa; one of the most noble-hearted men I ever knew, and one of the faithfulest friends: as such he was cherished to the last by Thackeray. He brought from home anecdotes of the men in whom we were interested—of Scott, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Lamb, and Hazlitt, with all of whom his father, Sir John Stoddart, was closely intimate. How well I remember his bringing in the first series of Hood's *Whims and Oddities*, then a new book, and how we all crowded round him! He was well read and quiet, and had an infinite relish for Thackeray's humour.

Gardiner too, afterwards M.P. for Leicester, was one of us: he was rather a junior, a very clever fellow, and one who entertained a great reverence for Thackeray. He faced the House of Commons boldly enough when a very young man, but has confessed to me that he never could get over his awe of Thackeray's power of sarcasm, though he had never been seriously hurt by it. He, too, is gone, and like poor Stoddart, preceded Thackeray.

Then there was another junior, my old and most valued friend Poynder, now the second master of Charterhouse.

James Young, too, survives, of ready wit, kind, good-natured and light-hearted, far fitter than I am to give a sketch of those days; but he has, perhaps, already thrown his stone on the cairn of his old school-fellow.

A few other names might be added, were it not for fear of exhausting the reader's patience. However, of those who survive, if any should cast their eyes over this sketch, they must acknowledge the substantial truth of it, whatever they may think of the few inferences I have ventured to draw from facts which they must recognize. According the highest honour to the character and genius of my old friend, I do not allow myself to dilate on that ample theme, but close here my record of what he was as a school-boy.

J. F. B.

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